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The Cough Drop

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The Cough Drop

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On Saturday, March 7, 2020, I got a call that my mom had a stroke in L.A. Despite the scary news about the virus, I decided to fly down on Monday morning. The airport was eerily empty. The cashiers refused to accept cash. I heard them whisper to each other, “Did they give you masks, or gloves, or hand sanitizer?” “Did they cut your hours?”

The Southwest flight was almost empty—less than 20 people. After arriving in Burbank, I took a train to downtown L.A., the metro line to Pasadena, and a shuttle to the hospital. Each time, I would wipe down my area. (I even used bleach wipes on my Visa card!) No one wore masks and I felt very out of place doing so myself.

The train to Union Station was packed with a mixed crowd. Men in suits sat next to day laborers, students sat with shoppers, and the children behind me bounced against my seat. Suddenly, a man in a suit, whose seat faced toward the aisle, started coughing. He couldn’t seem to stop. People tried to ignore him, but you could see the fear growing in everyone’s eyes.

After a few minutes, I noticed the man seated closest to him. He had weathered skin, rough hands, and work clothes dirty from a long day of laboring in the sun. He was a stark contrast to the coughing man in the nice suit. From under his broad-brimmed hat, I saw him reach into his pocket, pull out a cough drop, and offer it to the well-dressed stranger. The man refused it.

Wow. Was the gulf between them too great to bridge even during a pandemic? The rest of us held our breath, each hoping not to inhale any possible virus. The day laborer again wordlessly offered the cough drop. And this time, the coughing man accepted it.

I was touched to see human kindness win out. Could simple acts of kindness, like this one, save us from turning away from each other in fear? Within days, hospitals stopped allowing visitors, schools closed, and stay home orders were issued. Would fear or acts of human kindness control our lives for the rest of 2020? No one knew.

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